



ACCESS ISSUE KEY AS FRIENDSHIP PARK MARKS 40TH ANNIVERSARY

DEBBI BAKER • U-T

Dozens of people gathered on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border Saturday to celebrate the 40th anniversary of historic Friendship Park.

The small piece of land, part of Border Field State Park in the Tijuana River Valley adjacent to the Pacific Ocean, was dedicated Aug. 18, 1971, by then-first lady Pat Nixon.

It was long a place where families came together to meet, greet and touch each other through holes in the fence. That ended in 2009 when the Department of Homeland Security built a wrought-iron barrier and strictly limited access.

Enrique Morones, founder and president of the immigrant rights organization Border Angels — who wants to see the area returned to the way it used to be — addressed the crowd in English and in Spanish.

He pointed to a large picture of Nixon affixed to the fence that was also adorned with



sunflowers. The first lady is smiling and reaching over the border shaking hands with a man holding a small boy

"As you can see, when Pat Nixon was saying hello, there was no fence, there was no wall," said Morones, who advocates for an open border. "And one thing she said was, 'May there never be a wall between these two great countries.'"

Rep. Bob Filner, D-San Diego, who also addressed the assembly, gestured toward the deep blue ocean and said the beauty of the

area was juxtaposed by the ugliness of the metal barrier.

"We have to get rid of this so we can touch each other, so we can see each other, so we can sing to each other, so we can dance with each other," said Filner, a candidate for San Diego mayor.

"I want to quote another president in a different context, 'Mr. President, tear down this wall,' the congressman said to loud applause, echoing Ronald Reagan's famous speech at the Berlin Wall.

Saul Montiel, 22 (center), walks through an access gate with his sisters Brianna, 11, and Stephanie, 5, Saturday at Friendship Park. JAMES GREGG • U-T



Jorge Castillo plays with other members of his music group Saturday outside the entrance to Friendship Park before entering the gates to play with musicians on the Tijuana side. JAMES GREGG • U-T

History professor Christine Moore, who grew up in Imperial Beach, said she remembered when families would sit by the fence and have picnics.

"I'd like to see the park come back to life, Moore said.

The issue became particularly personal to her when one of her most promising students was deported four years ago. She said the girl came to the country with her family when she was 2 and that she considered herself an American.

Carlos Santos, another speaker at the event, immigrated legally to the country 10 years ago with his wife and oldest son.

He turned toward the people in Mexico who peered through the mesh of the fence and told the story of how he came to the park a few years

ago and was able to hug his mother for the first time in years. He said that moment meant everything to him.

"Don't give up hope," he said. "Someday people will be able to do that again."

The celebration included salsa dancing, remarks by Tijuana Councilwoman Maria Luisa Sanchez and other Mexican officials and a moment of silence to commemorate those who have died crossing the border.

A tree was planted in the same spot where Nixon had planted one 40 years ago that was now long gone.

Morones said he was working with the Border Patrol to make the area less restrictive and that the two groups had made some positive progress.

"We believe friendship has no border," Morones said.